

Chris Keenan

Chris Keenan led a very long and very full life of adventure. It started off with his birth in 1845 in Mullingar, Ireland. He attended the village school there for a few years, but he left home in a hurry at age 10. He had accidentally knocked out a priest with a rock he had thrown, and feared he had killed the man.

He signed on as a cabin boy aboard the *HMS Bellerophon*, hauling cargo and troops en route to the Crimean War. The ship saw active service when she sustained damage during the bombardment of Sebastopol. After the war, he continued to work on ships, making a number of trips to the eastern seaboard. When one of them made port in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Keenan decided to stay.

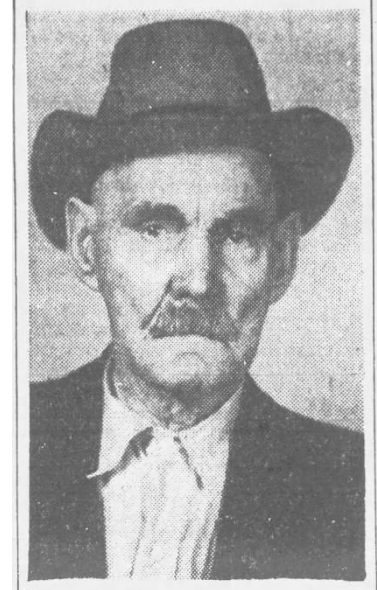
In Canada, he made his way west to what would become Manitoba, serving on a logging crew. Here he got caught up in Louis Riel's Red River Rebellion. In the aftermath, he left Canada for the United States. He worked as a lumberjack in the Maine woods, getting more of an education from another Irish priest. He headed south to the Boston area where he worked as a bartender for a number of years. Keenan even took part in the first Fenian Raid in 1866, an odd episode where Irish-American Civil War veterans invaded Canada in a bid for Irish independence from Britain.

He then moved west again to Minnesota to work cutting timber. Looking for a new adventure, he signed on with a survey crew for the Northern Pacific railways that brought him into Montana, based near Livingston. He also surveyed the Clark's Fork area in 1879.

Keenan turned his interest to prospecting and mining in Montana, primarily in the Butte and Boulder areas, but moving around the state. He located a mine near Cooke City, selling it for \$4,000. When he was in the Granite area, near Philipsburg, he worked for a company that paid its men half in cash and half in stock, and he made a considerable sum of some \$22,000.

He had a gift for understanding and locating mineral deposits. For a number of years, Keenan worked for Copper King Marcus Daly, scouting out locations for new mines and quality stands of timber. It was Daly who sent him to the Klondike, to investigate the potential of this new gold rush. Daly paid his expenses and \$175 per month while Keenan worked for him.

Keenan decided to stay on prospecting in the area. No gold strikes came his way, though he did win \$2000 betting on a 1,500 mile snowshoe race. And he met writer Rex Beach, who used him as inspiration for a minor character in his bestselling novel *The*



Spoilers. But his luck and his cash ran out. Stuck at the mouth of the Yukon River on the Bering Sea, he trudged back to Dawson in the Yukon Territory on foot, walking some 2,700 miles. He made his way back to Montana, vowing not to join in another gold rush.

He continued to prospect for ores and to work for other mining companies. In between these ventures, he spent three years prospecting in Chile, and several years timbering in California. There he claimed to have single-handedly cut down a towering redwood, and made a six-room house from the wood. He also worked as an assayer, carpenter, and in various other occupations.

In 1917, Keenan's latest claim, located in the Beartooth range, almost paid off big. He had located a large chromium deposit, and a good one. But his timing was off, as World War I drew to a close and the market for chromium declined sharply.

Keenan retired in Boulder at the age of 91, saying he had "dug more holes than anyone in Jefferson County." But even then, he couldn't rest. He went back to work briefly in the mining industry in 1945, getting his first Social Security card at the age of 100.

He moved into a rest home in Boulder in 1946, where he read westerns extensively and enjoyed visits with friends. Keenan lived to a ripe old age, just a month shy of his 103rd birthday. He attributed his long life variously, once saying it was because he had never been in any real trouble or that it was due to keeping busy, or moderation in drinking, smoking and eating. But even at that age, he joked that he was "liable to cut loose any time."

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Photo Credit:

Montana Standard, March 27, 1948